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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development of the Texas Educator Preparation Improvement Initiative (EPII), a program evaluation process for teacher preparation entities that involved a peer technical assistance program. Planners ensured that: all recommendations would be devoid of punitive measures; assistance would only be provided if requested by the entity; and participating educational groups understood that they could expect no financial reimbursement from the state. EPII's goal was to develop a system of peer assistance provided by and for all teacher preparation programs to help them attain and maintain appropriate performance levels by their students, as evidenced by multiple indicators. This involved creating: a resource manual, a clearinghouse to disseminate information, a cadre of peer assistants to help in the self-improvement process, and staff development programs. EPII staff sponsored a training institute for EPII council members and colleagues to become peer assistants. Visitation teams made periodic site visits, talking to staff and students, and they wrote the technical assistance reports. Funding for the EPII program ceased in February 2000. The initiative had accomplished its purpose of providing technical assistance to all Texas teacher preparation programs and continuous improvement through peer assistance. (SM)

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Texas' Educator Preparation Improvement Initiative (EPII): A Retrospective

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Texas' Educator Preparation Improvement Initiate (EPII): A Retrospective

Comprehensive and continuous evaluation has long been considered the life-blood of any viable and dynamic organization, whether in the private sector or in publicly funded institutions. The challenge is not in establishing the need for continuous assessment, but rather in establishing a process that is viewed as both non-punitive and constructive. In the early 1990's, the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) program evaluation process for educator preparation entities moved from a centralized team visitation/anlysis/reporting process to an outcomes-based approach. In essence, the emphasis became the destination, not the route of the journey. The central yardstick of quality is based on the results of a standardized certification examination known as the Examination for the Certification of Educators in Texas (ExCET).

Even under ideal circumstances, program assessment for most dynamic organizations is extremely challenging. What to ask, whom to ask, what data to collect, and when data should be collected and analyzed are only a few of the questions to consider. An added component of this puzzle is to determine how any of the previous information would relate to improved test scores.

When programmatic questions such as these are being raised, an effective internal evaluation process is a key component. To be successful, the expertise and resources necessary to implement self-corrective measures must exist. Stated simply, in the absence of adequate internal resources, external support mechanisms are essential to ensure qualitative outcomes and secure continued growth for most entities. More importantly, for some educator preparation programs, these

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meaningful responses could spell the difference between an accredited and unaccredited status.

The juxtaposition became complete. On one hand, certifying entities were to be held accountable by one-dimensional data, ExCET scores and Texas Oral Proficiency Tests (TOPT), with absolutely no statistical relationships to classroom performance. On the other hand, entities were being given greater flexibility to determine the important qualitative components of their preparation programs. Recognizing the breadth of the challenges of establishing an institutional process to meet state standards and embracing the challenges of preparing exemplary educators, discussion among five or six academic deans ensued; and the foundation for a peer assistance program emerged.

In the formative stages of the initiative that was later to become the Educator Preparation Improvement Initiative (EPII), the participants felt strongly that several basic ground rules or principles must be established and adhered to stringently if unique programs were to emerge. Foremost, any and all recommendations were to be devoid of punitive measures. Discussions centered on effective but non-prescriptive intervention through a peer review process, the hallmark of achievement in many professions (Wineburg, 1997). Both faculty and administrators alike often view an evaluation team site visitation as a source of nightmares (and perhaps, even hypertension and insomnia); but on more than one occasion during the EPII program conceptualization, those that participated were reminded of the importance of non-punitive assistance.

A second commitment was that assistance would be provided only if requested by the entity. Comprehensive evaluation is a serious undertaking by anyone's standards, and anything less than an invitation could be construed as both intrusive and punitive. Extending an invitation provided impetus for the self-assessment phase of the visit, a useful exercise in establishing educator ownership in the process (Wiliam and Black, 1996).

The third component of the EPII process could be described as a dividing principle--not so much from the standpoint of controversy or conflicting philosophies; but dividing in terms of commitment beyond rhetoric. In the absence of financial resources, the educational groups choosing to become a part of the peer assistance team could expect no financial reimbursement from the state or the entity in need of program assessment. The entire process was still in the brainstorming phase, and no funding or centralized organization was imminent or even envisioned. The spirits of those hashing through the details would not be deterred--the intent from the beginning was to submit a proposal to the Texas Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (TACTE, often referred to as the "Deans' Group") for endorsement and, possibly, limited support.

With a rough framework in mind, a few notes in hand, a rather glib representative selected to speak to the TACTE group, and plenty of enthusiasm, the proposal went forward. Not only was it well received, but it was also endorsed by TACTE. A concept proposal was then submitted to TEA for consideration. Within a brief period of time, the merit of the concept was endorsed, funding for a centralized office provided, and the Educator Preparation Improvement Initiative

(EPII) was born. While perhaps not an original or unique idea, for higher education in Texas at least, assistance by peers does represent a different way of conducting business. As Barnett Berry (1998) emphasized in a recent presentation to the *Renaissance Group*, it is important to develop consensus among a wide group of stakeholders and constituents to realize progress. The procedure also allows Texans to do what matters most--invest energies in preparing quality teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

The Pilot Year

Leadership for the development of peer technical assistance was provided by Dr. Robert Cox, Dean of the College of Education at Texas A&M University--Corpus Christi and TACTE and began on September 1, 1995. Alternative Certification Programs joined the initiative. Technical assistance was developed and provided by the EPII staff, and on-site peer assistance visits were conducted by educators trained in the process.

The EPII Coordinating Council and staff developed a mission statement, goal, and objectives to provide focus and direction. The mission statement is based on the belief that the education profession should assume a leadership role in assisting its constituents in the development, improvement and promotion of the profession. The collaborative efforts among educator preparation programs in Texas are to promote continuous improvement.

The goal of EPII is to develop a system of peer assistance provided by and for all educator preparation programs to assist programs in attaining and maintaining appropriate performance levels by their educator preparation students, as

evidenced by multiple indicators. Four objectives designed to meet this goal include: (1) to create and maintain a resource manual which includes, among other items, a section on the Accountability System for Educator Preparation (ASEP), state-adopted proficiencies and assessments, program self-assessment, support and mentoring, procedures for collegial assistance, and research; (2) to establish and support a clearinghouse to disseminate information regarding exemplary programs and practices, issues of interest, suggested readings, and opportunities for staff development; (3) to create a cadre of peer assistants who are able and willing to facilitate the self-improvement process through such activities as data analysis, information sharing, and on-site visits; and (4) to develop and conduct staff development programs through EPII institutes for educator programs based on needs identified through program self assessment and relevant research (Education Service Center, Region XIII, 1996).

The Texas School Improvement Initiative (TSII) at the Texas Education Agency provided an excellent model for the EPII process and its goal to facilitate continuous improvement. As the two initiatives work together and share information, the education profession in Texas will become stronger and assist in reaching the common goal of excellence and equity for all students. In addition, EPII staff receive support from the Educator Preparation and Certification Division and the Educator Assessment and Appraisal Division at TEA.

During the fall of 1995 and early part of spring, 1996, EPII staff and members of the Coordinating Council met several times to design the

training institute for the individuals who would be involved in the pilot visits scheduled for late spring, 1996.

Training

EPII staff sponsored a two-and-a-half day training institute for the members of the EPII Coordinating Council and colleagues from their respective entities to become peer assistants. The Accountability System for Educator Preparation results provided specific information as to what certification area examinations and/or student groups are issues of concern. Data results from ASEP provide the focus for on-site visits.

A total of 37 participants from 13 different entities attended the initial training institute, preparing this first cohort to conduct the pilot visits to five campuses. The training was designed to simulate an on-site visit and participants received training in the following areas: legislative updates, on-site events and procedures, key responsibilities of peer assistants, and Examination for the Certification of Educators in Texas (ExCET), Accountability System for Educator Preparation, program approval framework, reasons for a visit, basic components of the peer assistance process, critical components of planning and decision making, data gathering, data analysis and improvement strategies, presentations on successful practices, and development of probes and interviewing skills.

Participant opinions regarding the effectiveness of the training institute were recorded and analyzed to determine if changes needed to be made for improvement of the sessions. Overall, the EPII pilot training institute was well received, and comments indicated that the sessions were well organized and the speakers were

knowledgeable. The most useful topics were those relating directly to the knowledge and skills needed to prepare for and conduct an on-site visit. The informational presentations that were brief and explicitly aligned to the EPII purpose and mission were generally ranked highly (San Miguel, Ajuria, and Arredondo, 1996).

During the pilot year, five educator preparation programs were visited: Jarvis Christian College, Fort Worth Independent School District Alternative Certification Program, Education Service Center, Region XI Alternative Certification Program, Texas A&M University-Kingsville, and The University of Texas-Pan American. After the visitation process was fine-tuned, based again on responses from the peer assistance teams and the professionals at the site, peer assistance visits are continuing upon receiving an invitation from the institution.

On-Site Visitations

Site visits are rewarding activities, both for the visitation team and the entity being visited. The EPII staff makes the team selection after reviewing a submitted self-study prepared by the educational unit requesting the visit. ASEP data indicating low-performing areas and the expressed needs of the unit involved indicate who will be selected for the peer review.

A team chair is appointed who makes the arrangements with the campus contact concerning group and individual meetings with selected administrators, availability of meeting space for concentrated team work, names of individuals who need to be interviewed, insight into specific problems at the site, and any opportunity for social activities with faculty on campus (often a luncheon is planned for the EPII Visitation Team and as many of the professionals involved in the

process as are available). Teams consist of seven or eight EPII-trained individuals who are available to make the visit. Each visit is accompanied by a member of the EPII staff who serves both as a member of and consultant to the team. EPII staff members make an average of five visits a year.

Prior to the team visit, the peer assistance team receives a copy of the self-study, ASEP data, and other pertinent information the educational unit and the EPII staff send for review. The first meeting of the visiting group is held at the site, usually over dinner, in order for team members to get acquainted with one another and to address the special issues that will be studied during the two- or three-day stint. Teams spend many hours together during the process, in pairs and threesomes and as a group as well, and members develop a special camaraderie before the work is completed. The success of the visit appears to relate directly to the spirit of the team and its leader.

The second meeting of the group is with the faculty and administrators who are able to attend the function. University presidents, superintendents, or directors of the service center or alternative certification program (or their designees) attend this meeting to show support for the teacher education program on their campus. On university campuses, administrators from the College of Arts and Sciences are routinely invited to the opening meeting, and interviews are scheduled as a follow-up to this initial session. This meeting is a time when site personnel begin telling the visitation team about the nature of their program, its unique characteristics and problems, where information is located and how it can be acquired; and the team's function and scope is defined for those in attendance.

Often, team members reconnect with colleagues they know because of professional association memberships or state-level committee responsibilities. The state of Texas is large, but knowing other educators in the state is the rule, not the exception. One team member became reacquainted with a fellow doctoral student she had not seen in 22 years.

Interviewing constituencies involved in or related to teacher education programs is the next agenda item for the team. The majority of these interview schedules are preplanned, and team members are assigned to respective persons who are within their academic discipline or area of specialization. Most everyone involved in teacher education or related to it indirectly will be interviewed within the framework of time allotted for the campus visit. Presidents, superintendents, service center directors, vice presidents for academic affairs, deans (mainly in the College of Education and the College of Arts and Sciences), department chairs and faculty are interviewed.

For some participants, the highlight of the visit is the opportunity to interview students and/or make a trip to a collaborative school. Students are refreshingly candid about their coursework and field experiences, and their energy and enthusiasm for the teaching profession regenerates faculty and administrators who have dealt with the educational system for many years. Undergraduates, particularly, seem to have insight about their preparation and who is dedicated to the successful completion of their self-studies. A visit to a public school adds another dimension to the team's comprehension of the program they are assisting.

Writing the Technical Assistance Report is the major task of the visitation team, and writing begins as soon as team members believe they have enough information to analyze the problems an entity may be encountering. EPII has prepared a computer-generated program shell that allows teams a quick formatting approach to organizing the data they have collected. The categories for analysis are: (1) Overall Initiatives and Factors Affecting Low-Performing Certification Fields; (2) Certification Fields and Initiatives; and (3) Planning and Decision-Making.

Examples of initiatives which are commonly analyzed are field-based instruction, admission standards, support for teacher preparation, professional development, organization of the unit, and communication among campus departments and with public schools in the area. Once the initiative is recognized, then the assistance team makes suggestions about improving the area. A unit might be encouraged to increase the student teaching semester to a full semester or restructure their procedures for setting admission standards and completion of certification requirements.

Each low-performing certification field is also reviewed and initiatives are delineated, leading again to suggestions for improvement. Every attempt is made by the technical assistance team to focus on positive factors while suggestions are made for improving what is already in place within the unit or department. Recommendations within this category range from providing computers for all faculty members in the teacher education program to allocating more money for

travel for professional development to recommending the creation of a matrix that shows where ExCET competencies are being addressed within courses.

Occasionally, technical assistance teams recognize that the planning and decision-making process within the unit is flawed or non-existent. This third category lists the entity's strengths as well as areas of concern. The design of the Technical Assistance Report is to help those involved in teacher preparation more clearly understand their problems, yet leave them with the belief that they are empowered to solve the problems they face. Occasionally, preparing a report that emphasizes this empowerment approach means that the visitation team spends several long hours into the evening prior to their departure.

The final meeting of the visitation team occurs with the individuals who were present during the first meeting. Each member of the team participates in the oral presentation of the three components of the Technical Assistance Report. Interchanges between the team and those involved in teacher preparation focus on clarifying problems identified within the report. This activity is serious, yet the visitors present the information in a lighthearted, friendly manner to convey the message that hope is ever present; and the listeners respond with a concerted sigh of relief indicating that "they knew it all along."

Then the team departs. A written report is due to the EPII office and to the entity being visited within 45 days. The benefits to each participant on both sides is a renewed understanding that preparing teachers for Texas' classrooms is a worthy endeavor calling for the highest level of commitment one can give. The culmination

of the work allows each professional to possess insight that continuous improvement in teacher education is an achievable goal.

Epilogue

The State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) made a decision to cease funding for the EPII program in February, 2000. The initiative had accomplished its purpose of providing technical assistance to all educator preparation programs in Texas and its mission of continuous improvement through peer assistance aimed at meeting the standards of the Accountability System for Educator Preparation (ASEP). These two functions have been partially delegated to the Oversight Teams assigned to educator preparation programs that have not met accountability standards and the staff at SBEC.

Some additional forms of technical assistance may arise when the acceptable passing rates will be raised to 75% for first-time takers and 85% for cumulative test takers (a two-year period) in September 2002. In addition, a second indicator based on the performance of first-year teachers in the classroom and the redevelopment of many state certification exams based on more rigorous standards of the Texas public school curriculum, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), will be included in determining the accreditation rating in 2002,

Resources

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Trinidad San Miguel served as Coordinator of the Educator Preparation Improvement Initiative at the Education Service Center, Region XIII, in Austin, Texas. He became Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Administration & Psychological Services at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas, in January, 2000.